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ABSTRACT

This study examined how 3 Dominican children, ages 2 to 4 years old explore reading and writing in the context of their everyday lives and how adults and older siblings socialize young children into literacy. Data were collected during a school year. Each participant was observed 3 times a week for 2 hours per session, totaling approximately 200 hours for the year. Literacy events were defined as any reading or writing activity utilizing literacy artifacts, such as magazines, children's books, mail, paper, and pencils, initiated by anyone in the presence of the participant children. The researcher took notes, audiotaped the talk about significant literacy events, and talked with the mothers about their literacy experiences with their children. Findings indicated that the young participants initiated the interaction with print most of the time and tried to engage their mothers or siblings in the literacy events. In addition, they explored literacy while they engaged in everyday activities such as watching television, listening to music, singing, and playing. Print was not only mediated by their mothers, siblings, and friends, but also by today's available media, mainly television and music, and also by play. (Author/HTH)

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Home Literacy in the Everyday Life of Three Dominican Families

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Abstract

This paper shows how three Dominican children, ages 2 to 4 years old explore reading and writing in the context of their everyday lives and how adults and older siblings socialize young children into literacy.

Data was collected during a school year. Each participant was observed three times a week for two hours per session totaling about 200 hours for the year. Literacy events were defined as any reading or writing activity utilizing literacy artifacts, such as magazines, children's books, mail, paper, and pencils, initiated by anyone in the presence of the participant children. The researcher took notes, audiotaped the talk about significant literacy events, talked with the mothers about their literacy experiences with their children and interviewed them.

The young participants initiated the interaction with print most of the time and tried to engage their mothers or siblings in the literacy events. In addition, they explored literacy while they engaged in everyday activities such as watching television, listening to music, singing, and playing. Print was not only mediated by their mothers, siblings and friends but also by the today available media, mainly television and music, and also by play.

Introduction

The literature on early literacy development indicates that children's exploration of print starts before they go to school. Exploring books, exposure to literacy artifacts, and adult-child interaction around print are part of these early literacy experiences (Cochran-Smith 1984, Ferreiro & Teberosky 1982, Heath 1983, John-Steiner, Panofsky & Smith 1994, Leichter 1984, Sampson 1986, Schieffelin & Gilmore 1993, Taylor 1983, Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines 1988, Teale & Sulzby 1986, Vygotsky 1978). Children come to school with diverse literacy experiences which are extremely important in learning to read and write.

During the 1990's Dominicans were one of the fastest growing immigrant groups in New York City (Hernandez, Rivera-Batiz & Agodini, 1995). Despite the significant number of Dominican children in the public school system there is virtually no research on their early literacy experiences which may make the school system somewhat unprepared to educate these students.

Methodology

This study (Rodríguez, 1995; 1999) examined the following issues: 1) Availability of literacy materials and functions and uses of literacy in these homes; 2) how the targeted children explored print on their own and interacted with more mature literates; and 3)how parents saw their role and the teacher's role in the development of literacy.

This paper addresses: 1) How Virginia Suarez (2 years, 8 months), Jesús Velázquez (4 years, 5 months) and Roberto Martinez (3 years, 9 months) explored print on their own and interacted with more mature literates in the context of their life at home.

Data was collected during a school year. Each participant was observed three times a

week for two hours per session totaling about 200 hours for the year. Literacy events were defined as any reading or writing activity utilizing literacy artifacts, such as magazines, children's books, mail, paper, and pencils; and initiated by anyone in the presence of the participant children. The researcher took notes, audiotaped significant literacy events, talked with the mothers about their literacy experiences with their children and interviewed them.

The criteria for the selection of families were the following: 1) mother was born in the Dominican Republic; 2) there was a child in the family between 2 ½ and 5 years of age; 3) family income was $15,000 or less for a family of four members; 4) the family agreed to participate in the study.

The characteristics of these children's families are as follow. The three mothers were born in villages in the Dominican Republic and have been living in New York City in the Washington Heights-Inwood area for more than 10 years. None of the fathers were living in the home although Mr. Suarez visited frequently. All three families were living on public assistance. The three participant children are the youngest in their families. Virginia is the youngest in a family of six Jesús in a family of two and Roberto in a family of four. Mothers' formal education varies. Mrs. Suarez and Martínez had attended a local community college. Mrs. Velázquez took some English and beautician courses. (Table 1 displays the mothers' characteristics).

Children's Direct Interaction with Print

The targeted children, Virginia, Jesús and Roberto, initiated and organized the literacy event most of the time. In addition, they very often insisted on getting paper, pens and other literacy materials that were not always available or handy. Only Roberto, who attended Head

COMPOSITION OF THE THREE FAMILIES OF THE STUDY

	Mrs. Suarez	Mrs. Velázquez	Mrs. Martínez
Born	Dominican Village 1961	Dominican Village 1960	Dominican Village 1954
Arrived in NYC	1976 (age 15)	1978 (age 18)	1980 (age 26)
Education in Dominican Republic	Public school 1st to 7th grade	Finished high school	Finished high school, teacher training, and three years of university level accounting
Literacy	Literate in both English and Spanish	Literate in Spanish, Illiterate in English	Literate in both English and Spanish
History in U.S.	Few months of high school Passed GED Factory work 7 years	Factory work from 1978-1987 Some English courses Beautician Courses	Worked in a factory Studied computer science-48 credits
Children	8/80, Edward 9/82, Héctor 10/82, M. Elena (stepdaughter) 5/84, Ladila 6/85, Juan **1/91, Virginia**	3/88, José **4/89, Jesús**	11/81, Luis 01/83, Antonio 05/87, Sandra **12/89, Roberto**
Work status in 1993	On welfare	On welfare	On welfare
Education status in 1993	Back to school to study accounting 1989-1994		Thinking of returning to school

Start, had literacy materials. Virginia and Jesús used their siblings' and mother's material. Virginia, Jesús and Roberto initiated the literacy event when people around them engaged in literacy activities such as doing homework, reading the mail, reading women's magazines, or romances, or when they came across literacy artifacts such as pens, pencils, crayons, paper and books.

The three participants "wrote" lying or sitting on the floor, a bed, or the couch. The materials they used to write with were not conventional sheets of paper and included calendars, books, matchboxes, legs and hands, the floor, doors, the wall, tables or the couch.

. Mothers, siblings, neighbors and friends interacted with Virginia and Jesús in the following ways: being role models, providing them with literacy artifacts directly or indirectly, and teaching them. Virginia's and Jesús' mothers read and wrote in front of them but rarely initiated an activity around print. However, once their children had initiated the activity both mothers encouraged them by giving them feedback and praising what they were doing. They modeled for their children, were responsive to their cues and suggested some topics such as the colors or counting. Virginia's mother encouraged her to count or name the colors in English.

Although Virginia's brothers and sisters attended an after school program and did their homework at school, Jesús' brother and some neighbors often did their homework in front of Jesús and Virginia. Virginia's siblings and neighbors initiated the literacy activity sometimes and taught them the colors, numeracy, the vowels in Spanish, and how to write their names.

Roberto's interaction with print was different than Virginia's and Jesus' in two ways. Roberto initiated literacy events not only when somebody was reading or writing or when literacy artifacts were available, but also when he was tired of the activity he was doing (playing,

watching TV) or did not like the TV program that his brothers and sister were watching. In addition, Roberto initiated his literacy activities most of the time. His mother also often suggested that he draw and read when he was doing things that she did not like, such as sucking his bottle in front of the television set or getting restless from being in the apartment.

Mrs. Martinez's interaction with Roberto around print was incidental and consisted mostly of asking him questions regarding his drawings, the colors of his clothes, or the TV show that he was watching. Mrs. Martínez told Roberto's siblings many times that they have to correct him when necessary or he would not learn. Mrs. Martínez asked Roberto many questions. For example, while watching television she would ask him questions about the colors on the screen or what the program was about. She was the only mother doing literacy activities before bedtime, even though they were not carried out on a daily basis.

Mothers, siblings, neighbors and friends clearly showed their expectations regarding the targeted children's ability to learn. Virginia, Jesús, and Roberto knew that their siblings and mothers thought they were very smart and that they expected them to do school work well. Jesús's mother and Virginia's siblings showed amazement at how fast Jesús had learned to tie his shoes and compared him with José, who was slower doing activities that involved fine-motor coordination.

Children's Interaction with Print through Television, Music and Play

Like most children their age, Virginia, Jesús and Roberto's everyday life included watching television, listening to music, singing and playing. Watching television was a daily activity in the three households. Each family owned two television sets. One of them was in the

living room and the other in the mother's room. The TV set in the living room was virtually always on. In the Suarez home the TV was loud enough to be heard in all the apartment rooms and on the few occasions that the television was off, the tape recorder replaced it. In fact, in all the apartments it was sometimes observed that both the television set and the tape recorder were on in the same room at the same time.

The three participants enjoyed very much watching TV although they very seldom could choose the program and had to adapt to their mothers' or siblings' choices. Only Roberto's mother had some kind of restrictions on watching TV. She would turn it off when her children were doing homework and could not concentrate.

The three participants watched television while doing many different things such as eating, playing, writing, listening to music, singing, dancing, or in the case of Virginia and Roberto, drinking from their bottle right before taking a nap. While doing any of the activities described above, they would glance at the television program being shown and focus their attention on it for some time. However, all were able to watch television for extended periods of time, depending on the program.

Virginia was observed watching TV for as long as 45 minutes with some interruptions when there was a cartoon or when her siblings were watching a movie. She did not focus for more than a few minutes on the soap operas that her mother watched regularly, but she was able to sing the songs of at least three soap operas: "La Traidora," "Alcanzar una Estrella," and "Dos Mujeres un Camino" *[The Betrayed, To Reach a Star, and Two Women and a Destiny]*. Jesús also watched TV for extended periods of time, especially but not only when there were cartoons. He also watched the soap operas that his mother followed. His favorite channel was Channel 67,

the cartoon network, and some programs on Channel 5 such as Ninja Turtle and, especially, Power Rangers.

Roberto was observed watching TV for extended periods of time when there were cartoons or a movie. He loved Channel 67, the cartoon network, but did not like Channel 13, to Mrs. Martínez's dismay. She would have loved for him to watch "Sesame Street". Roberto was observed only once watching "Sesame Street". Mrs. Martínez did not watch the soap operas and did not allow her children to watch them, but she regularly watched the news in Spanish on Channels 47 and 41 and Roberto often watched the news with her.

What triggered these young children's attention toward TV was any music, dance, dramatic action, screaming or crying, commercials about toys and cereals, or commercials in which there were young children. Print did not discourage them from being attentive to the screen. A lot of print is usually involved in commercials in general, and especially in commercials about cereals, toys, and music, as well as at the beginning and the end of television programs. They were all observed focusing on the print when the credits where shown, and did not turn away when print was on screen. In order to know more about children's exploration of print on the screen and what they thought about the uses of print on TV, whenever a written message appeared on the screen, the researcher would ask them the following questions: "What is this?", "Do they say anything?", and "What do they say?" Virginia, Jesús and Roberto all were, at least sometime, aware of print on the screen. In addition, as did the young non-readers studied by Ferreiro and Teberosky (1982), Virginia and Jesús called anything written on screen numbers and were trying to make sense of the function or meaning of those marks on the screen. It seems that they were developing the same hypothesis about print on TV that young Mexicans and

Argentinians were developing about texts on cards accompanied by pictures (Ferreiro, 1984; Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982). But while the children studied by Ferreiro and her team assigned to the text the meaning of the pictures, Virginia and Jesús predicted the meaning of print based on their knowledge about the TV program. Virginia "read" "llévatelo" as "los números de llévatelo" [*take it away numbers*]. Virginia "read" "Zest" and "zestsacional" as "los números de que se besen" [*that they kissed each other's numbers*] because she had been watching the soap opera and that was the kind of language that she was used to hearing. Jesús "read" the names of some songs that appeared on the screen as "some numbers" that mean "Ricardo Montaner," the name of the singer that was said at that moment.

Roberto also focused on the TV screen when there was print but, unlike Virginia and Jesús, he did not call the written text "numbers." He "read," however, the texts based on his knowledge of the program he was watching. The sentence about Crest and "los precios más bajos del año" *[the lowest prices of the year]* are for him "noticias" *[news]*, because that is the program that his mother was watching at that moment and also the program in Spanish that she always watched.

The three participants tried to make sense of the shows they were watching. Whenever the researcher went to Virginia's home and she was watching TV, she would try to tell the researcher things about the movie, usually who the bad character was, so that the researcher could follow the story. Virginia also explained to the researcher some episodes that she liked.

Virginia asked questions when she could not make sense of the story she was watching and persisted when nobody answered or she was not satisfied with the answer.

Jesús tried to make sense of what happened in the show by asking questions, repeating

sentences and talking to himself. Jesús asked questions about the meaning of the TV programs, repeated sentences that he enjoyed such as "mind your own business," or talked aloud, probably to make sure that what he was watching made sense. The older children's and adults' reactions were not very encouraging to him. They indeed did not answer his questions either because they did not know the answers or because they were watching the program and did not like being disturbed.

Roberto also made comments that showed he was trying to make sense of the TV program, as in the following examples. While Roberto was watching TV, he made comments about the fish that had lipstick, the car that ran very fast, and the lawnmower. He laughed at them because he found all that amazing and funny. He was able to relate the Puerto Rico flag shown on TV with what he had done in school. His style of watching TV was different from the one shown by Virginia and Jesús, who asked questions. On the other hand, Roberto's mother used to ask him questions about the TV programs they were watching together and he was hardly ever observed asking questions himself, which may indicate that there was no need for him to ask questions-- that being his mother's role. While Virginia and Jesús asked questions that hardly ever were fully answered by anyone around them, Roberto showed understanding of the show and the world around him by making comments; but he did not ask questions, indicating that maybe asking too many questions of children may decrease the number of their own questions.

It seems that the movies on TV, the commercials, and the songs may have helped them to understand that print is meaningful, that print can be turned into sound, and that written language is different from oral language--concepts that are learned by other children through being read to (Smith, 1976, 1978; Clay, 1979, cited in Teale, 1981). Furthermore, watching TV may have

helped them develop a sense of story by trying to understand who the characters were, what objects were involved, where and when the action took place, what the main event consists of, why the event occurred, and what the consequences of the event were (Snow, Nathan, & Perlmann, 1985).

Targeted Children's Interactions with Print through Music

Music was present and valued in the three households by adults and children alike. Music on TV engaged children to the screen and was often available through tape recorders and radios when the TV was off and on. Furthermore, children were encouraged to listen to music, to dance, and sing.

Music was highly valued in these families and listening to music was part of the entertainment in Mrs. Suarez's and Mrs. Velázquez's homes, especially during the weekends and holidays. Virginia and Jesús enjoyed listening to and dancing "merengue," the traditional Dominican music, and were often observed singing the songs at the beginning and the end of the soap operas and some commercials, and the popular song "I Love You." Virginia loved El tio Enrique, a book that had a tape she liked to listen to over and over again. Roberto enjoyed singing songs such as "I Love You," "El Niño de Jenjibre," and "Dos Mujeres un Camino," the song for a well-known soap opera that he knew, although he was not allowed to watch the soap opera. Roberto also liked "merengue." In addition, singing was a bedtime activity as important as reading a book.

These children's oral language was indeed enriched by listening to music and singing, activities that were encouraged and highly valued in the homes. This appeared obvious when

mothers told their children to sing and dance for a visitor or the researcher. Perhaps listening to songs and singing play an important role in the development of vocabulary and the development of a schema of story, given the fact that songs have sometimes the format of a story. Yet, as Snow and Tabors (1993) point out, "oral forms of language are in some sense prior to literacy language" and "oral language skills are the basis for the development of writen language skills for children" (p. 6).

Targeted children's interaction with print through play

Play was defined as behavior which is pleasurable, has no extrinsic goals, is spontaneous and voluntary, and involves some active engagement on the part of the player (Garvey, 1990). Literacy was explored in a playful manner in the observed homes. Most of the literacy events observed were initiated when someone or many persons in the room were using literacy artifacts to fulfill one of the many social needs, such as completing homework, paying bills, or reading mail. However, if play is defined as above, then most of the literacy activities in which Virginia, Jesús, and Roberto engaged in were play.

Some literacy events were initiated when a pencil, a pen, crayons, a piece of paper or a book were in the child's way. This was especially the case for Virginia, whose interaction with a literacy artifact seemed an exploration of a new toy, as when she found crayons on the floor and took them out, one by one, while scribbling on the piece of paper at hand. This was also the case when Virginia "read" the book Clifford's Family. Virginia appeared to explore "reading" as another game. She explored print in books and literacy materials in a playful manner.

Most of the episodes described above in which Virginia, Jesús, and Roberto engaged in a

literacy event with their mothers, siblings, or neighbors were spontaneous and voluntary because they were initiated by the targeted children. In addition, the literacy event actively engaged the children and had an element of enjoyment that was not present at other moments, such as when José, Jesus' brother, was doing his homework and his work was not as good as his mother would have liked.

Virginia, Jesús, and Roberto seemed to explore writing, reading, and numeracy through play more than using writing and reading in play activities. However, using print during play was observed when Roberto played the game of school with Tomás and his sister's friend, Valeria, and on other occasions when he played school with his sister. Virginia and Jesús also played school with José, but they focused more on the school behavior and would say things such as "You have to behave" and "You have to do what the teacher tells you to do." Literacy activities were very seldom involved.

Conclusion

Research has shown that in print-oriented families children explore literacy well before they are formally taught how to read and write. This study shows that Virginia, Jesús, and Roberto did not enjoy the kind of activities present in print oriented families such as being read to and intensive and extensive exposure to all kinds of literacy materials. However, they were extremely interested in making sense of the world around them and print is part of that world. Thus, they initiated and organized the literacy activities when print was used in front of them and asked for help from more mature literates when needed. In addition, exploring print was integrated in their daily activities which included watching TV, listening to music, singing, and

playing.

Literacy is a social enterprise; it was originated by human beings in need of communication and is initially and best learned in the contexts in which it is used within a specific society and family at a specific moment in time. Print, a specific form of literacy, is also a tool easily available nowadays in highly technological societies, on television and in computer devices, and permeates most human endeavors. This study indicates that children explore literacy through all media available. Print was not only mediated by their mothers, siblings and friends but also by the media available today, that is, television and music, and by play.

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